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Apr
07

'Grave Concerns' to mark 50 more graves

By [Ben Selair](#) · April 7, 2009

He was born an Irish immigrant and became the first homesteader of Des Moines when he came to the Washington Territory around 1854. He died in 1899 of dementia. Number 447 was buried with only a stone grave maker etched with his number. At the time, society thought the anonymous identification of his resting place would avoid the public shame and stigma associated with mental illness. Times have changed. More than a century later, John Moore's grave now prominently displays his name.

"Dignity for 50" Ceremonies to place the new grave markers will be held from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturday, April 18, and Saturday, May 30, in Lakewood at the historical Western State Hospital Cemetery located at 8714 9th Avenue S.W. in Fort Steilacoom Park. The community is encouraged to participate.

The Grave Concerns Association, a group of community members and staff volunteers at Western State Hospital who operate as a 501-C3 organization dedicated to the restoration of the hospital's cemetery, will replace 50 stone markers during May, which is Mental Health Awareness Month.

Called "Dignity for 50," this effort is supported by the Regional Organizing Initiative of the Mental Health Transformation Grant as a vehicle to bring involved consumers from Greater Puget Sound together in an effort to combat stigma.

"With each numbered stone we replace, we erase some of the stigma of mental illness and restore the dignity and respect of that person," says Laurel Lemke, an 18-year employee of Western State Hospital and the chair of the Grave Concerns Association.

More than 3,200 psychiatric patients from Western State Hospital were buried in the cemetery between 1876 and 1953. At the time, the graves were only marked with numbers – an attempt to protect the privacy of hospital patients.

Today, with a general realization that people with mental illness should bear no shame or stigma, Grave Concerns has been raising private funds to replace the numbered markers with gravestones that include the patients' names, birthdates and date of death. Each marker costs \$40 and 120 markers have been replaced to date, as well as a stone memorial with 500 patient names.

"This project restores dignity to the once-nameless patients buried here," says Jill SanJule, Regional Organizing Initiative program manager. "It also helps educate the community, lessening fear and creating a better understanding of mental illness."

For donation information, contact Laura Lemke, 253-761-7533 or via email at lemkela@dshs.wa.gov.

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2 Comments

1

Beth Erkers

April 7th, 2009 at 8:45 pm

Ben,

Do you have a name and number of a person to contact to make a donation?

Thank you

2

Ben Sclair

April 7th, 2009 at 8:49 pm

Beth,

You can contact Laura Lemke, 253-761-7533 or via email at lemkela@dshs.wa.gov. Thank you for pointing this out, I'll add it to the original story as well.

Ben

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